Post-Bulletin

Our View: Electronic pollbooks are a 'must-have' on election day

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On Feb. 24, in an editorial about the proposed constitutional amendment that would require voters to show a photo ID, we argued that Minnesota shouldn't rush to set in stone the first solution that had been offered up. We also mentioned the possibility that so-called "electronic pollbooks" could solve the problem of election fraud — if it really is a major problem — without inconveniencing or disenfranchising thousands of Minnesotans.

At the time, we didn't have much information about how these pollbooks would work, so we expressed our concerns about their cost and how election judges in township halls and other polling places that lack Internet access would use them. Secretary of State Mark Ritchie immediately offered to come down and explain the technology, and by the time he left our offices on Friday, we were convinced that electronic pollbooks are a must-have tool.

Here's how Ritchie described the system's basics:

- For about \$700 each, a Minnetonka-based company called Datacard would provide laptop-like devices that would contain a region-specific portion of the Minnesota Department of Motor Vehicles photo database. Voters would be visually identified via a comparison with their most-recent photo in the system.
- Because the data is hard-loaded into the devices, no Internet access is needed. Lightly populated areas or smaller townships that can't afford the electronic pollbook would instead receive a paper pollbook that would include DMV photos of each registered voter. Net cost to the township? Zero.
- Would-be voters who have no photo in the DMV system would be photographed on the spot, and their image would eventually be added to the database thus making it very unlikely that anyone would risk trying to vote twice in the same election.

And there's more. One of the biggest drivers behind the photo ID push is illegal voting by felons who have not completed their sentences but have been released on parole or probation. It's a legitimate concern, and 131 people have been convicted so far in Minnesota. Unfortunately, a driver's license contains no information about a person's felonies.

Electronic pollbooks could solve that problem. "On the Friday afternoon before an election, we could take the most current list of felons from the Department of Corrections and cross-check so that their status shows up on their listing (in the DMV database)," Ritchie said. "If felons do make the mistake of coming in to vote, then we'll know it."

But what about people who haven't had a driver's license for years? "The DMV not only has all of our pictures, but they have all of the pictures going back at least 12 years of older people who've given up their driver's licenses," Ritchie said. "We have 84,000 voters in that situation, and electronic pollbooks would alleviate that problem."

The more we heard, the more we liked the idea of using technology to make things easier for voters.

The good news is that Rep. Mike Benson, a Republican from Rochester, is deeply involved in the elections reform process in St. Paul, and Ritchie had nothing but praise for the freshman legislator.

"Rep. Benson is perhaps one of the most thoughtful people on this," Ritchie said. "He's shown the pollbook technology to all of the GOP senior leadership. He took it right to the top. To have him picking up on this elections stuff is like a gift to me. Yes, he's a caucus guy, but he also has in mind the people of Minnesota and the perspective that, 'Hey, if we could all agree on something, we could really make this jump.'"

But there is bad news, too. Ritchie said that as electronic pollbooks get more exposure and attention in St. Paul, the proponents of the photo ID amendment aren't backing down. Instead, "They're stepping on the gas, trying to get it through as quickly as possible."

That suggests that the amendment's backers are motivated by politics, not a desire to clean up the state's election system.

Granted, a majority of Minnes otans like the idea of showing a photo ID before voting — but that might be because they didn't know there was a better alternative.

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